

# Information Brief

## Early Intervention

*Although schools may have an effective array of youth development and risk-focused prevention programs and services, there always will be a population of students (experts estimate between 10 – 15 percent) who will require more intensive, targeted interventions intended to reduce or eliminate their problem behaviors (Colvin, Kameenui, & Sugai, 1993). Practices designed to intervene early, when students begin to exhibit problems that persist despite school-wide and classroom interventions to which students typically respond, are important to a school's provision of a continuum of student-focused services.*

**CRITICAL ELEMENTS ADDRESSED:** *The school has a variety of programs and services intended to prevent or intervene early with students' social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties.*

### INTRODUCTION

***"The educational mission of schools comprises not only a focus on academics and addressing barriers to academic learning, but also encompasses a major role in promoting learning and development related to social and emotional functioning and safe, healthy, and resilient behavior."***

*- Policy Leadership Cadre  
Mental Health in Schools, UCLA 2001*

Because of the amount of close, first hand contact that school personnel have with our children and youth, they are in especially important and unique positions to identify the things that interfere with students' healthy development and successful learning. This is especially true at the earliest onset of problem behavior. Once identified, schools need to have in place resources and programs to which school staff can turn to for guidance and support. These support systems can assist school personnel in working with parents to identify and carry out home and school strategies that have promise of correcting difficulties before the problem worsens. Such early action can reduce both personal and financial costs to schools, families, and society.

### EARLY INTERVENTION MODELS

There are three models of early intervention designed to prevent or ameliorate the onset of student problem behaviors: early-age interventions, early warning signs interventions, and early-after-onset interventions.

#### ***Early Age Interventions***

With the recent findings in brain research and early childhood practices, the concept of early intervention has become associated with early childhood and primary aged students. These models incorporate family-focused interventions and strategies that promote early literacy, readiness to learn, and healthy child development. For the purpose of this brief, primary discussion will center on the other two types of early intervention.

#### ***Early Warning Signs***

Since the school shootings, school personnel are increasingly interested to know whether or not there is a set of behavioral warning signs that would signal that a given student is likely to engage in violent acts at school. They believe that such information would enable them to intervene in order to prevent an occurrence of violence.

Studies of the school shooters showed that no profile of student behaviors could predict behavior that would lead to violence and, in turn, direct actions. In fact, profiling students can do more harm than good. Nevertheless, the list of behaviors discussed in depth in the document, *Early Warning, Timely Response: A Guide To Safe Schools (1998)*, can enable us to address problem behaviors before they escalate into violence. The authors of *Early Warning, Timely Response* divides warning signs into two categories: "early warning signs" and "imminent warning signs." In contrast to early warning signs, imminent warning signs indicate that danger is likely. These signs usually are evident to a variety of people and occur as a sequence of overt hostile acts or threats directed at staff or other students. They should trigger an immediate response to ensure the safety of the student and others.

#### ***Early-After-Onset Interventions***

***"When the need directly affects learning, the school must meet the challenge."***

*- Carnegie Task Force on Education*

Not only can early intervention help with students who are potentially dangerous, but it also can assist with identifying and addressing the factors that place students at risk for academic failure and chronic discipline problems by removing barriers to student learning and success. The longer a barrier exists, the more difficult it is to remove and the more damage is done to the academic success and healthy development

of the student. That's why intervening early after onset of a student's problem behavior is so important.

As schools undertake reforms to create conditions that will take students to increasingly higher levels of achievement, a critical question is whether or not this new high standards, high stakes environment will benefit *all* students. To do so requires designing practices not only for students who are motivationally ready and able to profit from improved instruction, but also for those encountering internal and external barriers to that learning.

## BARRIERS TO LEARNING

*"Before a large proportion of students in schools can benefit significantly from instruction, we need to enable learning by attending to the many barriers that interfere with learning. Such barriers include a large range of biological, psychological, and socio-economic factors that make schools and communities unsafe and are linked to substance abuse, teen pregnancy, dropouts and other risk behaviors....Attending to such barriers requires making fundamental changes in educational support programs and finding ways to integrate these activities with community resources. At present neither school nor community reforms are likely to lead to the type of comprehensive integrated approach necessary for addressing these overlapping barriers to learning."*

-Adelman & Taylor

Center for Mental Health in Schools, UCLA 1999

Examples of barriers to learning include, but are not limited to, negative attitudes toward schooling, a lack of prerequisite skills, disabilities, lack of home involvement, lack of peer support, peers who are negative influences, lack of community involvement, and inadequate school, health, and social support services (Adelman and Taylor, 2000).

## A VIEW OF WHAT'S NEEDED

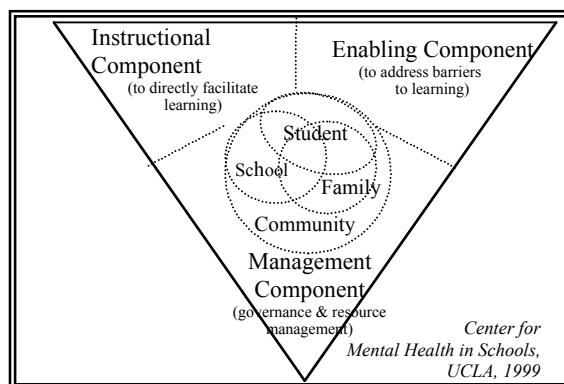
Adelman and Taylor (1999) propose that, in order to remove barriers to student learning and healthy personal-social behavior, an "enabling component" be added to the instructional and management components that traditionally make up the context for student learning. Six clusters of enabling activity address barriers to learning and healthy development for all students: classroom-focused activities, student and family assistance programs and services, crisis assistance and prevention, support for transitions, home involvement in schooling, and community outreach for involvement and support.

## LEARN MORE ABOUT IT:

### • Web sites:

- Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice: <http://cecp.air.org/>
- School Mental Health Project/Center for Mental Health in Schools, UCLA: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/>

- **In this Handbook:** See additional briefs, especially *A Continuum of Programs and Services*, *Positive Behavioral Supports*, *Risk-Focused Prevention*, *Problem Solving Teams*, and *Intensive Interventions*. In other sections of the manual, please refer to *Early Warning*, *Timely Response*, *Safeguarding Our Children: An Action Guide*, and "Success4's Critical Elements." For information beyond the scope of this handbook, see the Resources Section.



## THE INTERVENTION PROCESS

Schools may target individual students or groups for early interventions. A teacher and a student's parent(s) may design the interventions informally. A problem solving team composed of regular school staff and parents, or a child study (extended problem solving) team that includes specialists can design more formal early interventions.

Schools should have a process for reporting their concerns about a student, whether it be triggered by observation of early warning or imminent danger signs, or the concerns of a school staff member or parent about a student's progress in school. The family should become involved in the process from the very beginning, as should the student, when appropriate.

Once a school-based team has engaged in a problem - solving/solution - focused process, the outcome of their efforts is a plan that lays out academic or behavioral interventions. Plans that focus on academic concerns may include instructional strategies, accommodations, and/or modifications to curricular materials or the learning environment. Behavioral intervention plans incorporate positive behavioral supports.

## SUMMARY

Schools with an array of early intervention processes, structures, and services in place greatly reduce the human and financial cost of addressing the needs of students with problem behaviors and enhance the likelihood of student success in school and in life. The most effective early intervention programs engage the help and support of parents as partners from the beginning and actively involve appropriate community partners along the way.